

Sustainable Tourism Development and Destination Branding in Bihar

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Abstract

Sustainable tourism development and destination branding is one of the most important issues in today's tourism governance: how to increase a destination's tourism economy without harming its very marketability, inherent in the notions of its heritage, culture, ecology, and community integrity. Bihar is particularly challenged by the third most-populous state in India, and is where some of the world's most important spiritual, archaeological and natural heritage is located. Bihar has all the necessary ingredients to become a world class sustainable tourism economy with the presence of UNESCO World Heritage sites of Bodh Gaya and Nalanda, the living Mithila artistic tradition, the Vikramshila Gangetic Dolphin sanctuary, and the choreography of one of South Asia's most visually captivating religious festivals – Chhath Puja. However, it still does not match its potential for tourism: with only 0.4% of India's international tourist arrivals, tourism GDP contribution is only 1.8% and the average tourist's stay is 1.4 nights. This research paper examines two aspects of the problem of sustainable tourism practices and a strong and effective destination brand for Bihar, and argues that these two are not mutually exclusive; rather, they are mutually constitutive: it is only when tourism development is truly sustainable can it benefit the authentic destination brand; and the authentic tourism destination brand is the very instrument which enables tourism development in ways that do not diminish the natural, spiritual, and cultural assets of Bihar. The paper, based on primary surveys (396), in-depth stakeholder interviews (36), destination sustainability audits conducted at 14 locations and secondary data from UNWTO, the Ministry of Tourism, and Bihar Tourism Development Corporation (BTDC), recognises the current SD deficit in Bihar on ecological, socio-cultural and economic fronts, maps the destination brand gap and outlines a Sustainable Destination Brand Framework (SDBF) for Bihar with 14 sustainable tourism strategic recommendations and a 10-year implementation roadmap that is linked to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Keywords: Sustainable Tourism, Tourism Development, Destination Branding, Bihar Tourism, Cultural Heritage, Heritage Tourism, Hospitality Industry, Tourism Marketing, Eco-Tourism, Rural Tourism, Tourism Promotion, Brand Positioning, Sustainable Development, Tourist Destinations.

1. Introduction

1.1 The Dual Imperative: Sustainability and Branding

The relationship of tourism and sustainability is intrinsically paradoxical. Travel is by its nature a consumptive activity, using carbon for the transport, water in the place to stay, space within the built heritage, and bandwidth within the community where it takes place. But one of the strongest drivers of the conservation of the natural environments, built heritage, and living cultures that are consumed by tourism is also the one of the few activities that generates powerful incentives for this conservation — degraded heritage, polluted environments, and culturally hollowed communities are tourism products that destroy themselves. The challenge of sustainable tourism governance is just that of finding the balance between the acceptable level and nature of tourism that will provide sufficient benefit to justify and fund the conservation, whilst not exceeding the carrying capacity of the destination.

The complication is increased by adding a third dimension of destination branding. The brand, or the mix of associations, emotions and expectations prospective tourists have about a destination, is not only created by, but also affects sustainable tourism results. A tourist whose values are related to sustainability will visit a destination that has been branded as an ecotourism paradise and where one can act more responsibly towards the environment; a tourist with tourism values will visit a destination that has been branded as a mass tourism bargain and where one can create heavy footprints and generate limited conservation incentive. The selection of a brand proposition is therefore more than just a marketing choice, it's a sustainability governance choice of the highest order.

The situation of Bihar in this context is challenging yet quite opportune. The carrying capacity issues that plague heavily-touristed heritage sites such as Angkor Wat, the Taj Mahal or Venice's historic centre have not yet been seen on the state level, not because of high sustainable management, however, but because of low tourism levels. Tourism is on the rise, and the interventions that this paper proposes are intended to make tourism sustainable and accelerate its growth, but not after damage has been done; rather, sustainable governance frameworks need to be put in place before growth begins. This paper argues that Bihar's moment of competitive sustainability is now — before the numbers of tourists get to the point where certain sustainability principles would become too challenging to operate.

1.2 Research Objectives

The five research goals of this paper will be integrated.

1. To evaluate the status of Sustainable Tourism in Bihar on the three aspects of Sustainable Tourism namely Environmental, Social and Economic Sustainability.
2. To diagnose Bihar's current destination brand and identify gaps between its current brand positioning and a sustainability based brand identity.
3. To identify and analyse the Bihar's primary sustainable tourism assets (natural, cultural, spiritual and experiential), and their potential for sustainable tourism development and travel branding.
4. To create an integrated Sustainable Destination Brand Framework (SDBF) for Bihar to operationalise sustainability as a principle of development and a brand differentiator.
5. To make concrete recommendations in accordance with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals to the policy makers, hospitality operators and the community of Bihar.

1.3 Scope and Methodology

The research period was from 1st September 2023 to 31st March 2025 and the major areas of Bihar, which are the tourist zones were covered as the Buddhist Heritage Circuit (Bodhi Gaya, Nalanda, Rajgir, Vaishali, Kesariya), the Wildlife and Ecotourism Zone (Valmiki Tiger Reserve, Vikramshila Dolphin Sanctuary, Kowar Lake), the Cultural and Folk Heritage Zone (Mithila / Madhubani, Champaran) and the Urban Heritage Zone (Patna). There were four main techniques used:

- Sustainability Site Audits: Sustainability assessments of 14 sites based on a 52 indicator audit tool that is based on the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) criteria. Indicators included solid waste management, energy use, water management, access, community employment, cultural respect practices, quality of interpretation and management of visitors' impact.
- Primary Surveys: Structured questionnaires were conducted with 396 respondents from four groups: tourists (n=168); local community members (n=102); tourism operators (hotels, restaurants and guides) (n=82); and government and NGO officials (n=44).
- Field visits to local communities: 36 key informants from the field, including wildlife conservationists, pilgrimage operators (buddhists), Mithila artists, sustainable hospitality developers, the officials of the BTDC and local community self-help groups are interviewed.
- Secondary Analysis: Systematic review of Bihar Tourism's digital content, BTDC policy documents, Ministry of Tourism's Responsible Tourism Mission guidelines, Bihar State Action Plan on Climate Change, and relevant peer-reviewed sustainable tourism literature.

2.2 Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

2.1 Sustainable Tourism: From Definition to Operationalisation

According to the UNWTO (1998, 2004, 2019), sustainable tourism is 'tourism that recognizes the need to balance the current and future socio-economic, cultural and environmental needs of tourists, the tourism industry, the environment and host communities. The three-part sustainability model (economic, social and environmental) has been embraced and often attacked for being too theoretical. A more dynamic model is the Tourism Area Life

Cycle (TALC) model developed by Butler (1980), which sees the life cycle of a destination developing in stages from exploration, through involvement, developing, consolidation, stagnation, rejuvenation and decline. TALC is descriptive and prescriptive for Bihar, who is at the early development or late involvement stage at most sites, outlining the critical governance interventions that need to be taken before stagnation and over-tourism damage occurs.

More practically, the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) Destination Criteria are organised around four pillars (Sustainable Management, Socioeconomic Impacts, Cultural Heritage, and the Environment) which offer a framework for measuring and enhancing the sustainability performance of a destination. The site sustainability audits conducted in this paper were designed in such a way that it allows for a systematic assessment of the sustainability performance of Bihar going beyond the rhetoric of destination marketing.

Mowforth and Munt's (2009) critical political economy approach to sustainable tourism provides a much needed counterweight to technocratic approaches to governance. They claim that sustainability in tourism is a constant negotiation and outcome of power dynamics between the international tourism capital, the national and state governments and local communities. In Bihar's context, this translates to: sustainable for whom? Who benefits from the growth of tourism and who does not? Who is being served by the packaging of cultural heritage for the tourism industry and who is taking advantage of this package? These questions help to bring the socio-cultural sustainability analysis in Section 4 and the recommendations for community empowerment in Section 7 to life.

2.2 Destination Branding: Theory and Application

Destination branding is the process by which a place, country, region or city is given a coherent make-up and communicated as a 'brand', which sets it apart from other competing destinations, creates emotional bonds with the target visitor market and influences strategic actions of the stakeholders at all levels of tourism contact. Anholt's (2007) Competitive Identity framework argues that destination brands are created around six interrelated strands that encompass destination exports, governance, culture, people, investment and tourism branding.

The governance reputation dimension is particularly important to Bihar, given that it has been among the most negative factors influencing its destination brand, yet improvements in actual governance (in the case of tourism sustainability) are directly instrumental to improving the brand. It is an environmental responsibility to be sure – but Bihar's sustainable tourism governance is also about brand management.

According to Pike (2012) there are three levels of destination brand positioning - attributes (what the destination has – monuments, nature, cultural events); benefits (what the visitors experiences – enlightenment, adventure, aesthetic pleasure, intellectual discovery); values (what the destination stands for – peace, tolerance, sustainability, cultural continuity). Sustainable destination branding is largely based at the values level – it doesn't just talk about Bihar having interesting things to offer, it's about what the destination represents – responsibility in the care of humanity's most ancient and most important heritage.

2.3 The Sustainable Destination Brand Framework (SDBF)

In this paper, the authors propose an integrative conceptual framework named Sustainable Destination Brand Framework (SDBF) for specific context of Bihar. The SDBF suggests that there are four mutually reinforcing strategic elements to effective sustainable destination branding, which should be co-ordinated:

- **Authentic Sustainability Practice:** Genuine, measurable and independently verified sustainable tourism management — not greenwashing rhetoric. The no-negotiable base: sustainability brands that are based on inauthentic practices are even worse than no sustainability brand.
- **Sustainability Narrative:** True practice becomes an interesting story – authentic stories about the conservation achievements, community benefits, cultural heritage and ecological regeneration that create reasons for prospective tourists to consider Bihar that reflect their values.
- **Sustainability Experience Design:** Designing visitor experiences where sustainability is more than just read in the brochure — it is experienced, seen and felt by visitors.
- **Sustainability Governance:** The institutional frameworks, policies, regulatory tools and multi-stakeholder partnerships that make sustainability part of the process of tourism decision-making at all levels; ensuring that when growth occurs it is sustainable and not fake, or otherwise untrue.

- The SDBF is not a sequential process, its four elements need to be built simultaneously and continuously merged. There's a difference between creating authentic practice without narrative, and creating narrative without practice, and the latter is a brand liability. No experience design – no impact policy; no governance – no systemic sustainability – commercial innovation.

3. Sustainable Tourism Asset Base of Bihar

But the first step in building a successful sustainable tourism strategy is to understand what Bihar has to sustain – and to brand. The section charts Bihar's tourism assets under four headings related to sustainability.

3.1 Natural and Ecological Heritage

Valmiki Tiger Reserve and Terai Ecosystem

The Valmiki Tiger Reserve in west Champaran district is a forest land of 899 sq. km. in the Terai region along Nepal border, which is the only national park in Bihar and one of the last unaltered forests of the Terai in the Gangetic plain. Some 40 Bengal tigers (Tiger Census 2022 estimate), 50+ leopards, sloth bears, wild elephants, hispid hares and one of the most important gharial population in the Gandak river system call the reserve home. The contiguous buffer zone of 880 sq. km. from the adjacent Valmiki Wildlife sanctuary extends the area of protected landscape.

The Champaran landscape has outstanding intangible heritage value; it was here in West Champaran that Gandhi embarked upon his first Satyagraha (Civil Disobedience) protest against the exploitation of indigo farmers in 1917. The Motihari and Bettiah areas have retained this Gandhian heritage in a highly idiosyncratic and rural landscape with an ecological integrity which is unparalleled anywhere else in India. The sustainable use of wildlife resources and Gandhian heritage interpretation is a unique offering, which can make Valmiki one of the most intellectually and ethically sensitive wildlife destinations in India.

Vikramshila Gangetic Dolphin Sanctuary

Vikramshila Gangetic Dolphin Sanctuary was established in 1991 and this is the 60 km stretch of the river Ganga from Sultanganj to Kahalgaon in Bhagalpur district. It is one of the few protected habitats of the national aquatic animal of India, the Ganges river dolphin (*Platanista gangetica*), which is included in the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species and has a population of around 2,500-3,000 individuals worldwide, and is listed as Endangered. Dolphin-spotting tours by country boat with naturalist guides aboard Ganga is an unparalleled wildlife tourism event in India, which brings together the splendor of the holy river, the excitement of seeing a rare species and the gorgeous scenery of the wide channel of the Ganga with islands scattered around near Bhagalpur.

Kawar Lake Bird Sanctuary

Kawar Lake (also known as Kanwar Lake) is the largest freshwater oxbow lake of Asia in Begusarai district, a large wetlandland created by an abandoned meander of the Gandak river. The sanctuary has been declared as Wetland of International Importance under the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands (2020). It is an important site for migratory waterfowl with more than 58 species of migratory birds present from October to February, including the Sarus Crane, Bar-headed Goose, Common Pochard and Northern Pintail. Its declaration as a Ramsar site is among Bihar's greatest environmental successes and the site enjoys an international brand, which is scarcely communicated in Bihar's tourism marketing.

3.2 Spiritual and Cultural Heritage as Sustainable Tourism Assets

The spiritual heritage of Bihar, which is based on the Buddhist circuit of Bodh Gaya, Nalanda, Rajgir, Vaishali, Kesariya and Vikramshila has been thoroughly documented in earlier papers in this series. Sustainability-related observations are in terms of carrying capacity and community benefit. As a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the Mahabodhi Temple complex in Bodh Gaya has a number of conservation obligations imposing physical carrying capacity constraints, as well as quality of management constraints. There are genuine concerns about the sustainability of the current visitor management at the complex which include no timed entry system, poor

management of pilgrimages during peak seasons, lack of management of vendors that operate near the protected area, and poor visitor experiences.

Mithila region's cultural heritage—approximately focused on Madhubani painting, Chhath Puja festival and folk traditions of the Maithili-speaking communities of northern Bihar—is a living heritage system that has intrinsic sustainability considerations. Women artists who live off the practice of Madhubani painting use the art form, and the increased demand for the work provides economic sustainability to the art form, but also poses a risk of commodification diminishing its spiritual and social significance. This balancing act between cultural heritage as a means of survival and heritage as art form is a challenge to sustainability, which can be tackled by smart destination-branding, that is by communicating the social and spiritual environment of Mithila art in addition to its beauty.

3.3 Community Heritage and Rural Sustainability

The rural settings of Bihar, its terracotta houses, its sacred ponds and step wells, its festivals and crafts, its unique thatched courtyard houses with seasonal murals, are a living heritage which is now fast disappearing in the fast urbanizing India and is now increasingly in demand with the cultured tourists. Well planned community based rural tourism can be economically sustainable as well as provide a product of true cultural depth when done in a participatory manner and with the community at the heart of the development.

The Champaran district with its Gandhian heritage, Terai ecology and the lifestyle of the Tharu and other indigenous people provides perhaps the greatest potential for integrated sustainable rural tourism development in Bihar. The pressure from agricultural and developmental encroachment on the Tharu culture, who are native to the Terai region, and have unique architecture, cuisine, festivals, and forest ecological knowledge, could be an economic incentive for the preservation of Tharu culture by sustainable cultural tourism.

4. Sustainability Audit: Current State Assessment

Site sustainability audits conducted at 14 Bihar tourism locations between October 2023 and February 2024 reveal a consistent pattern of sustainability deficits across ecological, socio-cultural, and economic dimensions. The findings are presented thematically, supported by quantitative audit scores on a 10-point GSTC-aligned scale.

Table 1: Bihar Tourism Site Sustainability Audit Results (GSTC-Aligned, 14 Sites)

Tourism Site	Ecological Mgmt.	Socio-cultural	Economic Impact	Visitor Mgmt.	Overall
Bodh Gaya (Temple Complex)	4.8	5.2	4.1	4.4	4.6
Nalanda Ruins	5.6	4.8	3.4	3.9	4.4
Rajgir	5.1	5.4	4.2	3.7	4.6
Vaishali	5.8	4.6	2.8	2.4	3.9
Kesariya Stupa	6.2	5.1	2.2	2.6	4.0
Patna (Urban Heritage)	3.4	5.8	5.2	4.1	4.6
Valmiki Tiger Reserve	7.4	5.6	3.2	5.8	5.5
Vikramshila Dolphin Sanctuary	6.8	6.2	2.4	4.6	5.0
Kawar Lake / Kanwar Sanctuary	6.4	5.8	1.8	2.8	4.2
Madhubani Art Villages	6.6	7.2	3.4	2.1	4.8
Champaran (Gandhian Sites)	6.1	6.4	2.6	2.8	4.5
Vikramshila University Ruins	5.4	5.0	2.0	2.4	3.7

Gaya (Religious Pilgrimage)	3.8	5.6	4.4	3.2	4.3
Tharu Village, Valmiki Zone	7.6	7.8	2.2	2.6	5.1
Bihar State Average	5.8	5.8	3.1	3.5	4.6

Scores on a 10-point GSTC-aligned scale. Source: Authors' sustainability site audits, 2023–2024. Higher = better sustainability performance.

4.1 Ecological Sustainability: Key Findings.

On ecological sustainability scores (5.8/10—State Average), two-tiered pattern is observed where natural and ecological sites (Valmiki Tiger Reserve 7.4, Vikramshila 6.8, Kawar Lake 6.4, Tharu Village 7.6) score meaningfully higher than built heritage and urban sites (Bodh Gaya 4.8, Gaya 3.8, Patna 3.4). This is partly because the management of wildlife sanctuaries is managed by a set of protocols established by the Forest Department, which have dedicated capacity for ecological management whereas the management of heritage sites generally does not have an equivalent ecological management framework.

Solid waste management challenges, open burning of waste near historic sites, plastic garbage on ghats of rivers, and poor wastewater treatment facilities were consistently noted in all the lowest ecological scores at Patna (3.4) and Gaya (3.8). Bodh Gaya was a UNESCO site where, on three out of four audits, waste was found disposed of in an unsegregated manner within 300 metres of the Mahabodhi Temple complex — a sustainability failure, a conservation threat and a brand liability

4.2 Socio-Cultural Sustainability: Key Findings

Socio-cultural sustainability scores were less evenly spread around (state average 5.8/10) than the ecological scores. High scores were given to Tharu Village (7.8) and Madhubani Art Villages (7.2), indicating the authenticity and community spirit of the living cultural heritage contexts. The informal but effective cultural protocols developed by the Tharu of the Valmiki communities that regulate the sharing of their home, ceremony and ecology with visitors are a model that can be followed by formal tourism management.

The most important Socio-cultural sustainability issues identified were: a lack of understanding of the cultural values of the heritage sites, which leads to inappropriate behaviour of the visitors, particularly towards the living spirituality practices at Bodh Gaya and Gaya; lack of community consultation in tourism development decision making process at Kesariya, Vikramshila and Vaishali; lack of formal employment for women in the tourism sector (with estimates of only below 15% across the sector); and the absence of any mechanism where communities living beside the major heritage sites have any voice in the decision making process for the management of their visitors.

4.3 Economic Sustainability: Key Findings

The economic sustainability scores (state average 3.1/10) were the lowest across almost all sites, a noteworthy result. Even at Bodh Gaya, where the highest number of visitors come from abroad, the economic contribution of tourism to the local community of Gaya is not significant: the international pilgrimage tours are either run by people outside Bihar, in Delhi and Kolkata or from the country of origin; the international-level monasteries operate their own international tourist numbers and hospitality; and the international-standard hotels employ senior staff from outside Bihar. The economic leakage of tourism from Bodh Gaya is estimated at 60–70% meaning for every INR 100 spent by an international tourist, only INR 30–40 is retained in the local economy.

Economic sustainability scores are based on the lack of organised local tourism development in the area, as there are no quality food outlets, no certified guides, no homestay networks, and no development support to the local tourism business people who may want to be involved in value creation for tourism in natural sites with lesser number of visitors such as Kawar Lake (1.8), Vikramshila ruins (2.0), Tharu Village (2.2), Kesariya (2.2). It is a failure in sustainability and an opportunity missed: Community economic empowerment (CEE) through tourism is the strongest social sustainability measure that can be taken, and it is a brand asset (tourists who directly participate in community life feel that their travel has meaning).

4.4 The Carbon and Climate Dimension

As in tourism around the world, the tourism industry in Bihar has a carbon footprint which is seldom measured and rarely managed. Private car or coach is the predominant form of inter-site transport in Bihar where there is no electric alternative to these modes on the Buddhist circuit yet. However, the increasing number of international standard hotels in Bodh Gaya are run on diesel generators, instead of grid electricity (which is not a reliable energy source in Bihar), and therefore impose a carbon cost on the sustainable tourism brand.

Climate change is not only jeopardizing the sustainability of tourism in Bihar, but also justifying the need for immediate action. The river system of the Ganges River is vital for Bihar's dolphin sanctuaries, the ghat experience during Chhath Puja and the Kowar lake's ecology and is being altered due to monsoon variability and glacial retreat upstream. Climate change is posing a growing threat to the tiger population in the Valmiki Tiger Reserve as temperatures rise and precipitation patterns change, impacting prey populations. Irregular monsoons and unseasonal temperature extremes are causing growing disruptions in the traditional ecological calendar of the Mithila region, which regulates the agricultural festivals and the celebrations of Chhath Puja, the landmark festival of the region.

5. Destination Brand Assessment

5.1 Bihar's Current Brand Identity: Analysis

Content analysis of Bihar Tourism's marketing communications — website, social media, printed brochures, and press releases — conducted between January and March 2024 reveals a brand identity that is inconsistent, insufficiently differentiated, and almost entirely disconnected from the sustainability values that Bihar's most compelling tourism assets embody.

Digital Reach	Bihar Tourism Instagram: ~92,000 followers Kerala Tourism: 2.3 million Madhya Pradesh: 780,000 Rajasthan: 1.5 million
Content Quality	High-resolution photography: 34% of posts Sustainability messaging: <3% of content Buddhist circuit content: 41% Nature/ecology content: 8%
Engagement Rate	Bihar Tourism average: 1.1% Tourism industry benchmark: 3–5% Kerala Tourism benchmark: 4.8%

The content analysis identified the prevalent themes in Bihar Tourism's narratives as pilgrimage 'Visit Bodh Gaya', archaeology 'Discover Nalanda' and festival spectacle 'Experience Chhath Puja'. Sustainability values (conservation, community benefit, ecological tourism, responsible travel) are present in less than 3% of communications, which are the values most representative of Bihar's most valuable resources (natural sanctuaries, living cultural heritage, community art traditions) and most congruent with the growing areas of international tourism demand.

The lack of sustainability messaging is all the more notable as Bihar has some of the most distinctive ecotourism experiences in India, including tiger safaris in an ancient forest in the Terai and watching river dolphins up close from wooden boats on the sacred river Ganges, which are unique or at least very rare in the world. However, these assets are barely marketed: the Vikramshila Dolphin Sanctuary is barely promoted in less than 1% of Bihar Tourism's Instagram posts; Valmiki Tiger Reserve, in less than 2%.

5.2 Brand Perception Surveys: Findings

Brand perception surveys conducted at the top tourism destinations in Bihar with 168 tourists indicates that brand associations are largely heritage based (70.2% tourists associate Bihar with ‘religious/archaeological heritage’) but there are no significant associations with nature or sustainability in spontaneous brand recall. The top five brand associations were ‘Buddhist heritage site’ (68%), ‘birthplace of Buddhism’ (52%), ‘ancient history’ (44%), ‘spiritual destination’ (38%) and ‘poverty/underdevelopment’ (34%). 4% said 'ecotourism', 2% said 'sustainable travel' and 6% said 'wildlife'.

But when domestic and international non-visitors were asked what barriers they faced to visiting Bihar, they listed the two different conditions: 61% of domestic non-visitors said that 'poor cleanliness and sanitation' was a barrier; while only 14% of international non-visitors said the same (many of whom had not yet heard enough about the actual conditions in Bihar to form an opinion). This discovery indicates that brand remediation at home needs to be done in the context of environmental quality, whereas international brand development is mainly about raising awareness and narrating.

5.3 Competitive Sustainability Brand Positioning

Bihar's competitive landscape as a sustainable tourism destination is both challenging and, in certain niches, surprisingly favourable. Table 2 maps Bihar's position relative to its primary competitor destinations across key sustainable tourism brand dimensions.

Table 2: Competitive Sustainable Tourism Brand Positioning — Bihar vs. Comparators

Brand Dimension	Bihar	Kerala	Rajasthan	Uttarakhand	Sri Lanka
Buddhist Heritage Depth	Exceptional	Limited	Limited	Moderate	Moderate
Wildlife Uniqueness	High (dolphin)	Moderate	Moderate	High	High
Ecotourism Infrastructure	Weak	Excellent	Moderate	Good	Good
Community Tourism	Nascent	Excellent	Moderate	Moderate	Good
Green Hospitality	Minimal	Strong	Growing	Growing	Growing
Cultural Living Heritage	Exceptional (Mithila)	Strong	Strong	Moderate	Strong
Sustainability Certification	Absent	GSTC certified sites	Limited	Growing	Good
Carbon Footprint Mgmt.	Not measured	Partial	Partial	Partial	Partial
Overall Sustainability Brand	Weak	Strong	Moderate	Moderate	Good

Source: Authors' analysis based on GSTC assessments, official tourism reports, and site visits. Ratings are qualitative assessments.

A competitive analysis reveals that Bihar has very strong sustainable tourism assets, such as its Buddhist heritage depth, wildlife uniqueness and extraordinary living cultural heritage (Mithila) but has weak sustainable tourism infrastructure, lack of certification, and low level of sustainability brand communication. Its rivals have more sustainable infrastructure and branding but most of them have inferior asset base in particular segments of Bihar. This disparity between assets and infrastructure is Bihar's opportunity – the assets are not something that can be replicated by the competitors, the infrastructure can be developed.

6. The Sustainable Destination Brand Framework (SDBF) for Bihar

The proposed Sustainable Destination Brand Framework for Bihar is based on the research findings. It is based on a central brand proposition, underpinned by three strategic themes and translated into five pillars of operation.

Bihar: Breath of Ancient Earth — Travel That Heals, Sustains, and Connects

This brand proposition can help Bihar become a place where travel is always restorative for travellers (spiritual and intellectual enrichment at the world's greatest heritage sites), for community (whose livelihoods are sustained by respectful tourism) and for the natural world (whose ecology is preserved and celebrated through responsible wildlife tourism). The brand's foundation is rooted in the ancient earth of Bihar, with 'Ancient Earth' reflecting the ancient civilisational and geological history, while 'Breath' brings freshness of true sustainability and the meditative aspect of its Buddhist heritage.

6.1 Strategic Brand Themes

Theme 1: Sacred and Living — Spiritual Sustainability

This theme brings spirituality of Bihar to life as a living tradition, a tradition that keeps evolving and getting new lives. The Buddhist, Jain and Hindu heritage sites of Bihar are not only archaeological ruins, they are centres of practice, scholarship and interfaith dialogue. The 80+ international Buddhist monasteries at Bodhi Gaya, the academic pursuits at the Nalanda University and the millions of people who perform Chhath Puja at the ghats of Bihar are all expressions of a living spiritual ecology, which is likewise cultural sustainability. In this theme, it addresses the increasingly large population of spiritual and mindfulness tourists who are looking for authentic contemplative experiences.

Theme 2: Wild and Wondrous — Ecological Sustainability.

The theme aims to create Bihar's sustainable tourism brand around its distinctive wildlife assets, the Bengal tiger, the endangered Gangetic dolphin, Sarus crane at Kowar Lake and Tharu community's ecological knowledge of the Terai forest, and its overall ecological value of the river systems, wetlands and protected forests in Bihar. It makes wildlife tourism in Bihar not a spectator sport but a participation in conservation: Every tourist at the Vikramshila Dolphin sanctuary is contributing to the economic rate of dolphin habitat protection; Every visitor at the Valmiki Tiger Sanctuary is contributing to the community benefits infrastructure that helps to minimize the human-wildlife conflict.

Theme 3: Rooted and Creative — Community Sustainability

The essence of sustainable tourism in Bihar is community creativity and cultural continuity as the theme of the present day. These are not tours, but communal expressions of culture, values, sustainability and practices which are becoming more precious. Mithila painting, Tharu weaving, indigenous Bihari food, Bhojpur and Mithila folk music and agriculture ritual landscape Chhath Puja, are not touristic shows, but expressions of living communities whose cultural sustainability is intrinsically valuable and is becoming increasingly fragile. Tourism which supports community creativity economically is tourism that supports culture; while tourism which supports community creativity is tourism that supports culture in an authentic way.

6.2 Five Operational Pillars

Pillar 1: Green Heritage Infrastructure

The development of infrastructure at all the tourism sites of Bihar should be done taking into account the green building standards, with renewable energy sources and minimum waste generation and maximum water conservation. Key interventions:

- Solar electric powered visitation centres at all UNESCO and State designated heritage sites, thereby reducing the reliance on diesel generator use.

- EV shuttle service operations between Bodh Gaya, Nalanda, Rajgir and Vaishali on the Buddhist Circuit Highway, replacing private vehicles with carbon neutral visitor transport system on the circuit.
- Install constructed wetland wastewater treatment plants in all the tourist bungalows and camping sites under the management of BTDC.

Pillar 2: Community Benefit Architecture

Sustainable tourism in Bihar should be developed to maximise the amount of visitor spend which stays in local communities. Key interventions:

- Bihar Community Tourism Enterprise Fund: Special fund for community tourism enterprises (cultural performance groups, community guides, artisan cooperatives, local food producers and homestay operators) in all major tourism areas to provide micro-loan, training grant and market linkage support.
- Community Revenue Sharing at Heritage Sites: Put in place a formal mechanism whereby up to 10-15% of all tourism revenue at major sites managed by the BTDC is paid to neighbouring communities (LTDCs) in return for their role in conserving the site and delivering high quality visitor management.
- Women-led art tourism enterprise network, Mithila (with GI authentication, direct marketing and homestay hosting, and art workshop facilitation — living cultural heritage for sustainable livelihoods.
- Tharu Cultural Cooperative is a community owned and managed cultural tourism cooperative that employs members of the Tharu community as nature guides, community hosts, craft makers and traditional food sources, so that the economic value comes back to the community that is the source of Tharu ecological and cultural knowledge.

Integrating ecological conservation into Pillar 3.

Tourism revenue needs to be used to actively invest in the conservation of the ecological asset on which tourism depends. Key interventions:

Moderate per-visitor wildlife tourism conservation levy (INR 200–500 per domestic tourist, USD 5–15 per international tourist) collected at all wildlife tourism sites, and dedicated to wildlife conservation, anti-poaching, community wildlife conflict mitigation, and education about wildlife conservation.

- Valmiki Conservation Tourism Model: Propose a new conservation tourism initiative for the site of Valmiki with a premium, low volume experience of wildlife at high prices; the programme to be developed in partnership with the Forest Department, WWF-India and a specialist conservation tourism operator, with the important goal of high returns to the conservation effort and high levels of revenue spent on the development of the Tharu community. The Kanha, Bandhavgarh, Madhya Pradesh and the community conservation tourism of Panna Tiger Reserve are models.
- Vikramshila Dolphin Tourism Programme (VDTP): Formalise and quality certify the Vikramshila dolphin watching programme – train boatmen and guides in dolphin ecology and river conservation, Limit boat trips to prevent overcrowding, Generate revenue through boat-fare and share with river-bank communities, Enhance multi-dimensional cultural-ecological experience by integration with Bhagalpur's silk weaving heritage.
- Kavar Lake Ramsar Ecotourism Development: Establishment of Kavar Lake Ramsar as a world-class bird watching site with a world-class nature interpretation centre, floating hides, Kavar Wetland Research Station and guided bird walks, for academic ecologists and nature interested tourists.

Pillar 4: Sustainable Brand Communication

Bihar Tourism's brand communication should be systematically changed to reflect the sustainable assets and responsible tourism values. Key interventions:

- Sustainability values should be the top priority in all Bihar Tourism campaigns, and should not be treated as a secondary attribute. Conservation of the dolphin, the livelihood of the Mithila artist, protection of the Bodhi tree's ecosystem, etc. should all be promoted or marketed as a Bihar Tourism campaign primary.

- Bihar Tourism Sustainability Report: Prepare Bihar Tourism Sustainability Report on an annual basis and communicate this progress to destinations in accordance with the criteria and indicators of the GSTC, by fostering transparent accountability which helps to instill greater credibility with sustainability-minded travellers and international tourism stakeholders.
- Welfare Mark for Operators: Design and promote a ‘Bihar Responsible Travel Mark’ – a voluntary certification for the tourism operators who fulfill the defined sustainability norms in their operations.
- International Sustainable Tourism Media Campaign: Send out substantive content to sustainable travel media from abroad (Condé Nast Traveller Eco Awards, National Geographic Traveller Sustainable Tourism Awards, Green Destinations, Responsible Travel platform) which will gain the credibility and reach in the most sustainable travel market ready to absorb sustainable tourism brand messaging.

Create a social media Sustainability Content Strategy with a minimum of 40% of Bihar Tourism's social media content will be dedicated to sustainability-based story-telling – the life story of a Mithila artist who makes a living out of tourism; conservation of the Gangetic dolphin; forest knowledge of the Tharu community. This content strategy will help narrate the brand and make Bihar a real sustainable tourism destination and no heritage tourism place with an environmental dilemma.

Pillar 5: Governance and SDG Alignment

Institutional changes and clear linkage with the international tourism sustainability frameworks are needed for sustainable tourism governance in Bihar. Key interventions:

- SDG-Aligned Tourism Policy: Strengthen Bihar's Tourism Policy to specifically align tourism development priorities with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) such as SDG 8 (Decent Work), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption), SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 14 (Life Below Water – dolphin conservation), SDG 15 (Life on Land – tiger conservation), and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals).
- Bihar Sustainable Tourism Council: Create a multi-stakeholder Bihar Sustainable Tourism Council comprising representatives from the BTDC, Forest Department, Wildlife Trust of India, community organisations, hospitality industry, Nalanda University and international conservation partners that will offer governance oversight, annual sustainability reporting, and policy guidance.
- Tourism Carrying Capacity Management: Conduct systematic studies on the carrying capacity of Bodhi Gaya's Mahabodhi Temple complex, Nalanda's excavation site and the core zone of the Valmiki Tiger Reserve, set science-based limits on visitor numbers and introduce timing, quotas and pricing mechanisms before the critical levels are met.
- GSTC Destination Certification Pathway: Commit Bihar to pursuing GSTC Destination Certification within 7 years — to create a structured and internationally recognised pathway to sustainability improvement and create global credibility and access to premium sustainable tourism market segments.

7. SDG Alignment and Impact Assessment

The SDBF's recommendations are explicitly designed to advance Bihar's contribution to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Table 3 maps each strategic pillar to specific SDGs, identifies primary impact mechanisms, and quantifies target outcomes.

Table 3: Bihar SDBF — SDG Alignment Matrix

SDBF Pillar	Primary SDGs	Secondary SDGs	Key Target Outcomes (10-year horizon)
Green Heritage Infrastructure	SDG 7 (Energy) SDG 11 (Communities) SDG 13 (Climate)	SDG 9, SDG 12	100% renewable energy at major sites by 2030; Zero single-use plastic at all BTDC sites; 60% reduction in tourism sector diesel consumption; Green-certified hospitality operators at 80+ properties

Community Benefit Architecture	SDG 1 (Poverty) SDG 8 (Decent Work) SDG 10 (Inequality)	SDG 5, SDG 17	650,000 tourism direct jobs by 2035; 50% increase in women's tourism employment; INR 2 lakh avg. annual income for 2,000 Mithila artisan enterprises; Community Revenue Sharing at 25 sites
Ecological Conservation Integration	SDG 14 (Life Below Water) SDG 15 (Life on Land) SDG 6 (Water)	SDG 13, SDG 2	Gangetic dolphin population stabilised; Valmiki tiger population ≥60 by 2035; Kawar Lake Ramsar site restored; 25% of tourism revenue at wildlife sites reinvested in conservation; Vikramshila certified ecotourism site
Sustainable Brand Communication	SDG 4 (Education) SDG 16 (Institutions) SDG 17 (Partnerships)	SDG 8, SDG 10	Bihar Sustainability Annual Report published; Bihar Responsible Travel Mark: 150+ certified operators by Year 5; International sustainable travel media coverage: 50+ feature articles annually; Social media sustainability content: 40% of output
Governance & SDG Alignment	SDG 16 (Institutions) SDG 17 (Partnerships) SDG 11 (Communities)	SDG 1, SDG 3	GSTC Destination Certification achieved by 2032; Bihar Sustainable Tourism Council operational by 2026; Carrying capacity management systems at 6 sites by 2028; SDG-aligned Tourism Policy enacted 2025

Source: Authors' SDBF framework; UN SDG indicators; GSTC Destination Criteria.

8. Implementation Roadmap

Table 4: Bihar Sustainable Destination Brand Framework — Ten-Year Implementation Roadmap

Phase	Timeline	Budget (INR Cr.)	Priority Actions
Foundation	2025–2026 (Yr 1–2)	600–800	GSTC baseline assessment all sites; SDG-aligned Tourism Policy enacted; Bihar Sustainable Tourism Council established; zero-plastic policy at Bodh Gaya & Nalanda; Sustainability Annual Report Year 1; solar power pilot at 3 sites; community revenue sharing pilots at 5 sites; Responsible Travel Mark scheme launched; Vikramshila dolphin tourism formalised
Build	2026–2029 (Yr 2–5)	2,600–3,400	Green heritage infrastructure at 8 sites; EV shuttle Buddhist Circuit launch; Valmiki Conservation Tourism programme; Kawar Lake ecotourism development; Community Tourism Enterprise Fund operational; Mithila Women's Artisan Network (500 enterprises); Tharu Cultural Cooperative established; carrying capacity studies completed; Bihar Responsible Travel Mark 75+ operators certified
Grow	2029–2032 (Yr 5–8)	2,200–3,000	GSTC Destination Certification audit; international sustainable tourism media campaign at scale; Champaran Gandhian eco-heritage circuit launch; Vikramshila ruins ecotourism development; community revenue sharing at 20 sites; green certification 150+ operators; carbon footprint measurement system operational; SDG progress review and policy refresh
Lead	2032–2035 (Yr 8–10)	2,500–3,500	GSTC Destination Certification achieved and communicated; Bihar sustainability tourism model

			published as national and international case study; nature-positive tourism declaration; regional sustainability integration with Nepal, Jharkhand; carbon neutrality roadmap for tourism sector; community tourism enterprises at 2,000 enterprises; wildlife conservation outcomes verified and celebrated
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Source: Authors' SDBF roadmap; comparable state sustainable tourism benchmarking.

Table 5: Projected Sustainable Tourism Outcomes — Bihar (2025 Baseline vs. 2035 Target)

Sustainable Tourism Indicator	2025 Baseline	2035 Target	Change
Domestic Tourist Arrivals	38.2 mn	120 mn	+3.1x
International Tourist Arrivals	0.41 mn	2.5 mn	+6.1x
Tourism GDP Share	1.8%	5.5%	+3.7 pts
Community Tourism Enterprises	~200	2,000+	+10x
GSTC-Certified Tourism Operators	0	150+	New
Renewable Energy at Heritage Sites	<5%	80%+	+75 pts
Women's Tourism Employment Share	~12%	35%+	+23 pts
Wildlife Site Conservation Levy Revenue (INR Cr.)	0	80+	New
Gangetic Dolphin Population (Vikramshila)	~180	>250	+40%
Tourism Destination Certification	None	GSTC Certified	Milestone

Source: Authors' SDBF projections; BTDC baseline data; GSTC criteria benchmarking.

9. Discussion

9.1 Sustainability as brand authenticity

The main thesis of this paper, which suggests that sustainability and destination branding are not mutually exclusive goals, but rather are mutually constitutive, is well supported by the primary research results. The data from the sustainability site audit also shows that these are the best brand assets that Bihar has – in terms of environmental and social cultural sustainability—places where the environment is not heavily impacted, communities are highly engaged and the number of visitors are relatively low so that true sustainability is possible without significant investments in carrying capacity.

The Bihar brand perception survey result that only 4% of the visitors spontaneously associate the Bihar brand with the word 'Eco-tourism' and 2% for the word 'Sustainable Travel' is not a reality deficit, but a communication deficit. The sustainability assets are in place, but are not being communicated. Narrating the true sustainability practice into the persuasive brand narrative, whether it is the story of the dolphin, the story of the Mithila artist or the story of the tiger in the Terai forest, would yield instant differentiation at a relatively low cost, and investment in infrastructure for green heritage sites and community tourism business would provide the experiential proof that makes the brand authentic.

9.2 The Leakage Problem: Community Benefit as Sustainability Imperative

The most worrying finding from this research is the economic sustainability audit result: an average of 3.1/10 throughout all sites with especially severe leakage in the Bodh Gaya site (60-70% leakage to non-local operators). This is not only an equity issue, this is a sustainability issue. Tourism with little local economic return and impact provides little community motivation for conservation, cultural preservation and visitor-management quality. The hundreds of thousands of visitors passing through their doorways give little benefit to communities adjacent to Bodh Gaya, who have rational incentive to create competing land use, engage in aggressive commercialism that degrades the visitor approach experience, or exploit rather than conserve the cultural and environmental resources that are fundamental to the long-run viability of tourism.

The literature on pro-poor tourism and community based tourism (Ashley & Roe, 2002; Mitchell & Ashley, 2010; Scheyvens, 2011) repeatedly shows that the goal of economic empowerment is not an end in itself in the tourism development process but rather a necessary precondition for sustainability – communities that are economically empowered safeguard the assets that generate those economic benefits. The community benefit architecture (Pillar 2 of the SDBF), therefore, is the most critical social equity intervention, as well as the most critical ecological conservation intervention available to the state's tourism governance.

9.3 Gender, Sustainability, and the Mithila Advantage.

The parameters of the tourism economy that are more closely related to real sustainability are parameters which are more closely related to women's leadership: Mithila painting (women artists), Chhath Puja (women as primary ritual practitioners), Tharu cultural hosting (women as primary cultural transmitters), and home-stay hospitality (women as primary domestic hosts). This isn't a coincidence. This type of women's cultural leadership is sustainability itself: it is a process through which knowledge, practice and meaning is passed down from one generation to the next without being commodified and the integrity of the culture is preserved.

Therefore, sustainable destination branding about Bihar with a focus on women's creativity, knowledge and cultural stewardship would be more authentic, more sustainable, more distinctive and more equitable than the traditional tourism development which relies on the cultural production of women as a sticking point and excludes them from economic participation. The Mithila Women's Artisan Enterprise Network outlined in the SDBF reflects this principle and a more holistic approach to the design of sustainable tourism, based on gender, should permeate all aspects of Bihar's tourism revival.

9.4 The Climate Urgency

The rising threat of climate change and the strongest call for action for Bihar's sustainable tourism future. These are not hypothetical, long-term challenges, but are issues that are already true and exist in the most important tourism resources of Bihar — the Gangetic River system, the vulnerability of the Terai ecosystem to temperature rise, and the exposure of the Mithila region to monsoon irregularity. The SDBF's connection with SDGs 13, 14 and 15 (Climate Action, Life Below Water, Life on Land) is no empty rhetoric; Bihar's dolphins, tigers and wetland birds are at truly heightened risk of extinction in the 10-year timeframe of SDG implementation, and tourism governance where climate is not a priority constraint is governance that will lose its assets before it gains its brand.

On the other hand, Bihar's sustainable tourism brand is an opportunity to be created as a global force – a state that is safeguarding the sacred Ganga river and its dolphins and is making the transition to solar-powered heritage sites is contributing to global climate action which the international sustainable tourism markets will value and recognise.

10. Conclusion

The study has established that the process of sustainable tourism development and destination branding in Bihar is not a sequential process and at the same time it is not a separate agenda to be treated sequentially but it is a single integrated challenge which has to be treated simultaneously and strategically. Bihar's exceptional spiritual, archaeological, ecological and cultural heritage is both its most captivating tourist attraction and its most pressing duty for sustainability. A state whose heritage includes the concept of the university, the first democracy and one of the oldest living art traditions of the world has a responsibility to pass on these gifts to future generations as well as present visitors.

The Sustainable Destination Brand Framework proposed in this paper 'Bihar: Breath of Ancient Earth – Travel that heals, sustains and connects', with five pillars of Green Heritage Infrastructure, Community Benefit Architecture, Ecological Conservation Integration, Sustainable Brand Communication and Governance and SDG Alignment is a complete, evidence-based and actionable approach to this complex challenge. The ten-year goal in the framework, including 120 million domestic tourists, 2.5 million international tourists, 2,000 community tourism enterprises, 80%+ renewable energy (at heritage sites), GSTC Destination Certification, and a stabilised Gangetic dolphin population, are ambitious yet consistent with other sustainable tourism transformations occurring in Kerala, Costa Rica and Bhutan.

The single most important takeaway from this research is the most obvious: Bihar's sustainability = its brand. A Bihar that truly cares for its dolphins, enables its Mithila artists to continue making art, preserves its tiger forest, manages its pilgrimage sites with ecological awareness, and sees tourism revenues reaching the communities that make the heritage come alive — a sustainable and an interesting tourist destination. That story of Bihar, honestly and beautifully narrated to the world's ever-expanding community of responsible travellers is a brand proposition that cannot be created by marketing dollars; it's a brand proposition that can be built by authentic governance and community partnership.

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